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Do university rankings contribute to transparency?

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CHE Symposium 19/20 June 2008

Counting, measuring, estimating...a blessing or a curse for higher education institutions?

Achieving Transparency

Roundtable: William Locke, CHERI, Open University, UK

Lead author of the recent report for the Higher Education Funding Council of England:

Counting what is measured or measuring what counts? League tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England.

Notes on main points

Do university rankings contribute to transparency?

Two strands of the research:

- Analysis of five selected university rankings, UK national and world
- Investigation of impact on HEIs' actions and decision-making (survey and case studies)

Extensive findings summarised in the report and included as appendices on the HEFCE website.

Analysis of the five league tables: findings

- The five league tables do not provide a complete picture of the sector
- Some of the measures included are poor proxies for the qualities identified
- There is insufficient transparency about the way the league tables are compiled
- The resulting rankings largely reflect reputational factors and not necessarily the quality or performance of institutions
- The format and content of league tables could be brought up to date

Comments:

League tables employ a deficit model of a university: ie the degree of inferiority to Oxford and Cambridge (in the UK rankings) and to Harvard (in the world rankings). (Actually a 'double deficit' model, due to the process of compilation: once for each indicator, and again for the overall aggregate ranking.)

This fits well with the UK's hierarchical HE system, the myth of 'meritocracy' that sustains it and the rhetoric of 'fair play', 'playing by the same rules' and 'a level playing field'. It makes transparent the inequality in institutional reputation but obscures the quality and performance of individual academic departments and faculties (and some smaller, non-university, postgraduate and part-time institutions).

The term 'league table' is also misleading. Football teams start the season with no points and differences in performance can lead to changes in position during the competition, even

promotion and relegation. In the UK, as elsewhere, HEIs have hugely different resources, wealth, reputation, characteristics etc, and most commercial league tables gain or lose credibility by how closely they reflect the established reputational hierarchy of institutions, with the Russell Group at or near the top and the ex-Polytechnics in the bottom half. And there is no promotion to the Russell Group – this is an exclusive club in the ‘great’ British aristocratic tradition.

Increased marketisation and consumerism in HE are likely to:

- increase the influence of university rankings and particularly the world rankings (in the increasingly global competition for students, staff, research funding and contracts)
- incite a reputational arms race between the ‘top’ universities
- further consolidate the hierarchy of institutions and emerging differentiation between national HE systems (particularly between those with ‘world class’ universities and those without)

So, university rankings largely reflect and reinforce reputation but mainly conceal quality, performance, added value, value for money, fitness for purpose etc (in other words, the very information that consumers of HE are looking for).

Impacts on higher education institutions: findings

- Higher education institutions in the UK are strongly influenced by league tables
- Institutions do not feel they have sufficient influence on the compilers and the methodologies used in the rankings
- Institutions are especially responding to the National Student Survey (NSS, a survey of final year undergraduates commenced in 2005)
- League tables have resulted in better data collection within institutions
- Staff morale is affected by league tables
- League tables may conflict with other policy priorities, at institutional, national and international levels

Comments:

Our findings broadly support Ellen Hazelkorn’s research for the OECD, but UK institutions are more critical of league tables and reluctant to acknowledge their influence on decision-making. Yet they have a distinctive influence on ‘lay’ governors from business who, familiar with league tables in other contexts (eg stock market results, rich lists), read a lot into them and believe that enhancing institutional ‘performance’ will improve ranking position. Institutional managers are also using league tables as a driver for internal change and being highly selective in using their ranking positions for use in publicity material. Lower than expected ranking positions can damage staff morale. Efforts to improve ranking positions can conflict with government and institutional policies on, for example, widening participation, maintaining academic standards and local community engagement.

Particular indicators used in university rankings are very influential in their own right: for example, research assessment results, the NSS, entry qualifications and graduate employment. Institutions have improved their data collection for supplying to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), because they are keen to tell the best story possible

within the regulatory requirements. They are mirroring the processes adopted by the compilers of league tables (as well as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), NSS, graduate employment survey etc), using them as performance indicators and even setting targets to improve their position in university rankings. But the changes are aimed at increasing scores and positions and not necessarily at actually improving the nature and quality of research, learning and teaching, graduate prospects etc.

Several highly publicised cases of HEIs encouraging their students to give their courses high ratings in the NSS have come to light, and this will inevitably undermine its validity as a measure of quality. Institutions have adopted the NSS questions in the first and second years as a means of identifying issues that can be used to achieve better scores in the final year. Institutions also aim to maximise response rates, not just to improve the validity of the results, but on the assumption that those who would not complete the questionnaire without encouragement are likely to be more satisfied with their courses. Similar approaches are being adopted for the survey of undergraduates six months after graduation (the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education [DLHE] survey). Some institutions actively and publicly encourage participation making it clear that the survey affects the league table position of the graduates' *alma mater* and thereby the standing of their degrees.

So, HEIs in the UK are responding to university rankings and the individual indicators featured, but they are obscuring better measures of mission achievement and inducing perverse behaviour.

Institutions' perceptions of the impacts of league tables on users

- 'Traditional' prospective students from advantaged backgrounds are more likely to use league tables
- Internationally, league tables influence students, academics and governments

In our research, HEIs confirmed that younger prospective students from advantaged backgrounds and with higher academic achievements are more likely to use league tables in their decision-making than applicants who are mature, locally recruited, more vocationally orientated and/or from less advantaged backgrounds. However, league tables may be influential, but only part of the complex decision making process and often used to confirm a decision already made rather than to make initial selections. Factors such as subject and location still appear to play a greater part in decision-making. It remains to be proved, however, that applicants from less advantaged backgrounds are put off from applying to universities that top the league tables.

International students seem to be increasingly using league tables in selecting which higher education institution in the UK to apply to. Foreign governments and scholarship bodies are using them to inform decisions about support for students and which institutions in the UK to partner with in research and other initiatives. League tables appear to influence international academics from some countries in deciding which UK institution to come to, and more so than academics moving institution within the UK.

Example from University of Exeter job advert:

“All four university league tables firmly place Exeter in the top 20 of more than 100 UK universities. Exeter is listed 14th in The Guardian, 17th in the Times Good University guide and the Sunday Times and 19th in the Good University Guide, published in the Independent. The University scores highly for student satisfaction, completion rates, and for students achieving good honours degrees (Firsts or 2:1s). It has won three Queen's Anniversary Prizes and in November 2007 the University was named Times Higher University of the Year 2007-08.”

So, the influence of university rankings appears to be increasing among those who can exercise choice in where they apply and invest in HE. However, they may not be the decisive factor, especially where more sophisticated and customised sources of information about HEIs are available.

Finally, the rankings appear to have a subtle but significant influence on government policy in the UK which is, to some extent, fuelled by some of the universities themselves. There is an enduring concern with supporting and promoting the few so-called ‘world class’ universities the UK has, and enabling them to compete with the top US institutions. For example, the increasing selectivity in the public funding of research is aimed at protecting the larger, usually science-based, centres of research excellence. But the Government's preoccupation with the ‘top’ universities also extends to its policies on widening participation, which seem to be overly concerned with increasing the opportunities for students from under-represented groups to gain access to HEIs “where competition for places is fiercest and which offer the highest financial rates of return”, i.e. the research-intensive institutions of the Russell Group. There is much less concern about the vocationally-orientated, teaching-focused and community-engaged institutions that have a long history of serving the disadvantaged, non-traditional and under-represented students. What this does, in effect, is maintain and refine the hierarchy of HEIs, despite the abolition of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics in 1992 and the creation of new, so-called ‘teaching-only’, universities from the larger previously higher education colleges in 2004.

William Locke, June 2008.